

A Brief Visit to Northern France and Belgium: Late May 1974

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The north-eastern corner of France bordering the Belgian frontier is certainly a part of the continent of Europe that has not figured apparently for a long time in our entomological literature, especially as regards its lepidoptera. But most fortunately on the Belgian side the recent Atlas Provisoire of the insects of that country published under the direction of M. Leclercq has greatly enhanced the knowledge of the distribution of species in several Orders. In particular many species of butterflies and moths of that country are enumerated together with excellent maps of 10 km. squares drawn up by M. Verstraeten at the headquarters of Sciences Agronomiques situated near Gembloux. It is perhaps surprising what a rich area this part of Europe is for many local insects. It was with this intention of sampling this region, somewhat neglected by British lepidopterists, that I got in touch with Major Anthony Bedford Russell who was stationed in this area in connection with his duties with NATO.

He very kindly asked me to visit him at the end of May, when I duly set out in very unpropitious conditions on the 24th, travelling by boat to Calais and thence by train via Lille and Valenciennes to the big junction at Aulnoye where his wife met me. We drove the 10 miles to Bellignies, their home for more than a year in a part of the Château de Croy made famous in the 1914-18 war as a refuge for escaping British prisoners. En route we skirted the great Forêt de Mormal, formerly one of the most prolific localities in France for the *Apaturas*. This was our venue on 25th May when my host drove me to the southern region of the forest which is about ten miles long by four in breadth. It is well-known that this grand area which is still very dense, was much ravaged in two wars and is now well tended by the local municipality so that regrettably much hornbeam has replaced oak and we could find little *Salix* anywhere along the paths or rides. We worked a big open area that had been recently cut. Conditions were very warm, but we were disappointed at the lack of insects. There were a few *Clossiana selene* Schiff. and *Anthocharis cardamines* L. Other butterflies seen were *Callophrys rubi* L., *Polyommatus icarus* Rott., *Pararge megera* L., *Ochlodes venata* Br. & Grey and lots of brimstones. Among moths flushed were two *Parasemia plantaginis* L., one of which was the white male *f. hospita* which is usually associated with high levels in Britain. The small noctuid *Eustrotia bankiana* Fab. was also on the wing, while the commonest geometers were *Minoa murinata* Scop. and *Pseudopanthera macularia* L.

The next morning, 26th May, dawned rather overcast. However, we set out early and soon after entering Belgium less than three miles from Bellignies, we got on to the big motorway from Dunkirk to the Rhine. It was not long before we did the

stretch to Namur where we turned southwards along part of the Meuse Valley towards Dinant. At this period about mid-day the clouds cleared and the rest of the day was of brilliant sunshine and very warm, which made for very good collecting as we soon found there was plenty on the wing to keep us busy in this delectable part of the Ardennes Forest. Our first halt was along a wooded road near the small village of Nassognes where near a large clump of nettles we took a female of *Araschnia levana* L. of the true spring form with its full map markings. On a nearby slope were flying *Clossiana euphrosyne* L. and *Hamearis lucina* L. which was to prove very prevalent in the district. We made a further halt near a marshy patch not far from St. Hubert. Here we met with the first *Erebia medusa* Schiff. which we were surprised to see on the wing at this somewhat early date in the north. We also came across *Carterocephalus palaemon* Pall. as well as *Cyaniris semiargus* Rott. in an adjoining wood. We had a picnic lunch among the beeches of the Forêt de St. Hubert and from a large patch of bilberry was flying a number of the little Emerald *Iodis putata* L., which is very similar to *I. lactearia* L. but is absent from the British Isles. Our main quarry was *Coenonympha hero* L. which according to Atlas Provisoire was to be found around St. Hubert and Rochefort. We visited several likely-looking localities, but failed to find it in this part of the Ardennes. However, we came across at least two large slopes with rough grass and wooded background which was alive with butterflies. In each *E. medusa* was comparatively common and quite fresh, but all males. *H. lucina* seemed to be everywhere with quite a good sprinkling of *C. palaemon*. *Leptidea sinapis* L. was quite numerous as were *Pyrgus malvae* L. and *Erynnis tages* L. We were surprised to find *Mellicta athalia* Rott. already out and we also saw *Clossiana dia* L. and a single *Colias croceus* Four. En route home in a small wood my host caught a worn *Eu Vanessa antiopa* L. which must have been at least eight months old. We returned to the Château de Croy by a much more cross-country route through the southernmost parts of Belgium adjoining the French frontier. We were well pleased with the numbers and variety of insects we had seen on this 200-mile tour.

After a promising start on 27th May conditions somewhat deteriorated till the afternoon when I accompanied my host once more to the Forêt de Mormal. Again the most common butterfly was *C. selene*. More *P. plantaginis* were on the wing and we flushed a good many geometers, mainly *Cepphis advenaria* Hübn., *Perizoma affinitata* Stepens and *Idaea dealbata* L. But a heavy thunderstorm put an end to our operations there. We were however welcomed on 28th May by a very fine warm day which we were able to put to very good advantage. We set out early to visit the great forest region which spans the area of Belgium between the Sambre and Meuse rivers. This large region seems quite unspoilt and we were able to visit a good many localities in it, starting off with the Forêt de Chimay. Here in a clearing both *C. euphrosyne* and *C. selene*

were comparatively numerous and in good order. In another part of the great forest we walked up a wide ride lined with willows and aspen and searched in vain for larvae of the *Apaturas* and of *Limenitis populi* L. which is prevalent in these forests in mid-June. Both the small fritillaries were again common. Later we found a rough grassy slope bordering a disused quarry where *E. medusa* was flying. It was near the *hameau* of Aublain, a point for this species more westerly than any marked on the Atlas Provisoire. In this spot we also saw *C. palaemon*, *Spialia sertorius* L. and *Cupido minimus* Fuessly. In the later afternoon we halted in another part of the forest where we came across *N. lucina* in another very westerly point of its range as well *Thymelicus sylvestris* Poda, a very early date for this Skipper. We returned to Bellignies via Beaumont and Malplaquet, scene of the famous battle in 1709. The grounds of the Château de Croy produced a good many *A. cardamines* and *Pieris napi* L. We recorded just 30 species of butterflies in the four days of quite profitable collecting in this very interesting part of northern France and southern Belgium. On 29th May I returned by the same route as I arrived, taking the Milan express at Aulnoye to Calais and reaching London the same afternoon after what had proved a most pleasant and profitable few days thanks to the kindness of my hosts.

Notes and Observations

BUTTERFLIES IN THE ISLES OF SCILLY. — I was interested in the article *Late Autumn in the Isles of Scilly* by Mr. R. P. Demuth (*Ent. Record*, **86**: 72-73). I have been bird-watching in the Scillies during early October since 1968, but unfortunately have kept butterfly records only since 1971. The weather during my visits in 1971 and 1972 was, for the most part, warm and sunny, in 1973, colder but still fairly sunny, but in 1974 it was cold and showery with frequent strong winds, hence the paucity of sightings in the last two years, particularly in 1974.

Detailed below are my sightings for the four years:

1971 (2nd to 9th October): Speckled Wood (*Pararge aegeria*), numerous — easily the most abundant species. Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*), common; seen on St. Mary's, Treco and St. Agnes. Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*), fairly common. Small Copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*), a few seen, mainly on St. Agnes.

1972 (30th September to 7th October): Speckled Wood, common. Wall butterfly (*Pararge megera*), one on St. Mary's. Red Admiral, common; particularly in the Abbey Gardens, Treco. Painted Lady, only two seen. Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*), very few seen. Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*), one or two on St. Agnes. Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*), two blues swirling away in the wind on St. Agnes were almost certainly of this species. Large White (*Pieris brassicae*), a few seen. Small White (*Pieris rapae*), a few seen.